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**The Iowa Blind History Archive
History of Blindness in Iowa - Oral History Project
Interview with [Name]
Conducted by [Name]
[Date]
Transcribed by [Name]**

NOTE: Any text included in brackets [] is information that was added by the narrator after reviewing the original transcript. Therefore, this information is not included in the audio version of the interview.

**Mary L. McGee, Age 55, Des Moines
Karen Keninger
Iowa Department for the Blind, 524 Fourth Street,
Des Moines, Iowa 50309
10/2/2010**

Karen Keninger: My name is Karen Keninger and we are recording with Mary McGee today, October 2, 2010 in my office at the Iowa Department for the Blind. And Mary, I

want to go over this just to make sure that you are aware of what we're doing. All the stories submitted to this project will become part of the History of Blindness Collection owned by the Iowa Department for the Blind. By submitting your story, you are acknowledging that your story is a gift, which transfers to the Iowa Department for the Blind all legal title and all literary property rights. You will be granting to the Iowa Department for the Blind an unrestricted license to use your recording and all the information which it contains in any manner that the Department for the Blind may wish to use it, and for as long as the Iowa Department for the Blind wishes to use it. Do you agree to have your story recorded?

Mary McGee: Oh yeah.

Keninger: Okay, all right. Would you please give me your name, your age, and your address?

McGee: Mary L. McGee. I am 55 years old, I think, and my address is: 201 Locust #341, Des Moines, Iowa 50309-1761.

Keninger: Okay. Mary, what would you like to talk about today?

McGee: Well, I'm going today to talk about the Jeanie's bar story that seemed to be such a hit out in the other room. I will be emailing some more information relative to my educational experiences to Shan.

Keninger: Okay, wonderful.

McGee: But, now I want to talk about, I guess, when I came into the Orientation Center and how I met my husband here.

Keninger: Okay.

McGee: Do you just want me to go ahead and give a narrative, or is this question and answer?

Keninger: You can go ahead and give me a narrative, and if I have questions, I'll ask. How about that?

McGee: Okay. I have albinism, which is a congenital defect. It's a genetic thing. I was born with vision that is never going to be any better than 20/200. I've always vacillated between whether I fit in the world of blind people or sighted people, because I went to the Iowa Braille and Sight Saving School through tenth grade. And, if anybody can figure out what a sight saver is I wish they'd tell me, because I haven't figured that out to this day. And I'm a practicing attorney, and I'm supposed to know a few things. But, I went to public high school the last few years of high school, and then I went to Luther College in Decorah, on a double major of biology and psychology. Then, I came to the Orientation Center.

I met a man named Dewey Cummings, who was a Rehab. Counselor in Field Operations out of Dubuque, and I was struggling at Luther, not academically, but with getting information. That was in 1972 through 1976. So, I believe I met Dewey in 1975. That was before the regulations for the Rehabilitation Act became effective, so there was no accommodation in those days. He introduced me to the Department for the Blind, which I'll admit I had a negative

attitude about, because in 1969 and 1970, the Iowa Braille School and the Iowa Department for the Blind were having, what I like to call a turf war. That's all kind of beside the point, but I was skeptical. But, Dewey told me they could provide me readers through Voc. Rehab., and that would make it much easier for me to get through the course work. Okay, I'll bite; give me your sales pitch I thought. And he did, and the readers did make things easier.

Well, I wanted to go on to medical school. I took the MCAP with no accommodations. I did okay, but no medical school would take anybody who was legally blind. They just wouldn't. Well, I wanted to go to law school. Well, there was talk that the Department for the Blind could provide me financial aid to go to law school. So, I'll come to your Orientation Center and see what it's like, but I just know I'm not going to like it. You're going to teach me to be a blind person. You're going to make me carry a cane. You're going to make me read Braille. You're going to do all this stuff that my family's going to be more ashamed of me than it already is.

5:00

McGee: I'm going to be able to never go home and all this stuff. But, I came. And, I was introduced to the students, and this I remember like it was yesterday. There was a man here named Leroy McGee, and I thought he was the meanest SOB in the whole world; and he thought I was a haughty little bitch, 'cause I just graduated from college and thought I knew a lot of stuff. And, he had come from the working class, and I had come right out of one of the best colleges in the state of Iowa. I had been Dean's List. I thought I knew

everything. And so, we'd sit in Business class and bicker about things. And, I just couldn't wait to get away from this guy, but somehow we found Jeanie's Lounge up the street, and it was straight west of Keo. You walk straight west, and it was on the corner of this block up here, I guess it would be...it was Fifth and Keo in those days. There was another bar down at Fourth and Grand. It was called the King's Wood.

And, Orientation was tough. Both of us had an awful time. Kenneth Jernigan was here then. And, I hated Kenneth Jernigan then, too, but I learned to love him by the time I got done. And he came to our wedding, even.

But, somehow Leroy and I started to socialize. He played the guitar, and he'd sit in the Rec. Room and play the guitar and sing country music. And, you couldn't help but hear it. So, somehow, eventually we got together. We started hanging out at Jeanie's and the King's Wood. We couldn't wait for Business Class to get over with. We were gone, we didn't want anything to do with some of that other crap. We were gone. And, we both drank. Sometimes we'd come staggering home. You can stagger with a cane just as much as you can stagger with vision. And, by the time we both left Orientation, we were going to live together, and we did.

And then in 1977, we ended up getting married up at St. Ambrose Cathedral. I went through religious initiation. What is it? They called it Roman Catholic Initiation for Adults in those days. I was a Lutheran, and I took that with Father Lorenzo. I took those classes and got confirmed so I could get married in the church. And, we've been married for 30...well since '77. I think that's about 32 years. And, I still...still I will say to some degree, to some degree, I do not

wholly follow everything they teach here, but most of it I agree with. And, I'm willing to write off the things that I don't agree with as my problem. It's probably just my stubbornness. Now is there anything you want to ask me about that?

Keninger: Yeah, what things? Expand on that last thing that you said; the things that you don't agree with.

McGee: Understanding and being patient with sighted people. That's what I have the most problem with. I am not a patient person, and if I...Like, I guess, I don't believe I was sent here to be a teacher. If I was supposed to be a teacher, I would major in education and would be teaching kids. But no, I wasn't cut out for that kind of life.

So, I will give education once, but if it doesn't seem to sink in, and the evidence is in my favor, and I know I'm right, then it's time to fight. It's like, if you run into somebody who doesn't want to provide accommodation, and you explain how your SenseView or your CCTV or whatever it is, or your Braille, how your...Well, like you. If you went to a training seminar, and you had asked for Braille handouts in advance, and then when you got there, they didn't have any. And they said, well, we can't produce that, it's too late in the game.

10:00

McGee: Oh, but I called you and asked for that. We just forgot to do it, we're sorry. Well, maybe you can let that go; I can't. And, around here, we were kind of taught that the sighted public is ignorant. You have to excuse a lot of things. I have problems with that to this day. I just got done

serving a six-year term as Disability Caucus Chair of the Iowa Democratic Party. And I had to get out of it, because I felt like I was trying to bail out the ocean with a teacup. I just couldn't do it anymore; time to chill out. But, that's the only thing that I ever had a problem with.

Keninger: I remember...I don't know if this should go on the tape or not. But, when we were in high school at the same time, we were in the band, do you remember that?

McGee: Yes.

Keninger: And, you got First Chair Clarinet, because you were way better than me. (Laughter)

McGee: Well, I continued to play First Chair Clarinet in public high school, and even at the Luther College Concert Band. But, boy, it was tough.

Keninger: Yeah.

McGee: See, and that's one of the things I'm going to put in the education thing, and I know it's probably...And, I mean no disrespect, and if I hurt your feelings, I'll apologize on the tape in advance. I think the Braille School gave me a substandard education, when I got into public school.

Keninger: Did you find yourself behind?

McGee: Oh yes.

Keninger: You won't hurt my feelings, you know. Everybody has their own experiences.

McGee: But, yeah. It was very, very...And, there was no preparation given as to how fast public school goes.

Keninger: All the material to read, and all the speed, because we went pretty slow didn't we?

McGee: Half the time, Karen, we didn't even finish our book.

Keninger: Yeah. Yeah, that's true.

McGee: You know. Like, the algebra book, and the history book. We wouldn't even get through the book. But, the point is, I made it. And, I will say that in the educational thing, even though I went through the Braille School and suffered through that Rocco-Jernigan war. You remember that.

Keninger: Oh, I do well. Yes.

McGee: And, I made it through the public school making the honor roll; and I made it through college. I think some of it was just God's gift I was smart and tenacious.

Keninger: Sure.

McGee: I went through law school before ADA, and that was tough.

Keninger: Where did you go to law school?

McGee: Drake.

Keninger: Oh, okay.

McGee: And, I don't know what Drake was like for you going through in journalism. But, the law school was not receptive to anybody doing things without vision.

Keninger: I had a different experience.

McGee: Were they very nice to you?

Keninger: They were, but I had a fantastic advisor. And, I think that makes all the difference, you know, with the staff and people that I worked with.

McGee: Well, you know, lawyers; they're a different breed. They're like doctors. Set in their ways.

Keninger: Yeah.

McGee: Very much so. And, they will not change their minds.

Keninger: Well, we've got a little bit more time, is there anything else you want to talk about right now?

McGee: Yes. The fact that, aside from a husband, I think the thing that the Orientation Center did for me was made me feel not like a freak. I had always felt like a freak until I came here, because my parents were ashamed of me. They

didn't want anybody to know that I had any kind of a disability. And, it was when I was at Vinton, they liked that. I was away. I was away, and I remember when I'd come home on weekends and vacations, going to Sunday school and church and things like that. It was very, very hard, because I went to that place. "She goes to that place, there's something wrong with her." I was basically ostracized. It was...And, then when the Orientation Center did get me to use a cane...

15:00

McGee: Well, I don't use a cane very much, because I've got glasses that help a lot more than the ones that we had 30 years ago. But, I still need one on certain days when the sun's too bad. But, when I'd go home from the Orientation Center, like, to go for a visit, my dad and my aunt and everybody was wanting me to leave the cane home, because they didn't want anybody to know I was using one of those things.

Now that I'm...let's see, I guess I need to throw in that back in those days, 21 was legal age. I graduated from college when I was 21, and came to the Orientation Center when I was 21. In fact, my dad didn't even want me to come here. I know...having a birthday on June first, I think I started here like June 8, something like that. Now, he didn't want me to come here because they were going to turn me into a blind person. Never you mind that I had squinted and gotten headaches, such bad headaches I'd throw up. Never you mind that I had to work twice as hard as everybody else to get things done. He did not want me coming to a Commission for the Blind, because they were going to turn

me into a blind person, and then I'd have that stigma. And so, when I was 21 I came here. I finally figured out that I can't see. I can't see, and I'm just as good as anybody else, and if people don't like it, they know what they can do about it.

I did go to law school. I didn't have the money to go. I don't know what the deal was, but I don't think I even asked the Department for money to go to law school, and I think I just wanted to get a job then. I think I was pretty fed up with academics in general, and because we didn't have CCTV's. We didn't have ZoomText. We didn't have JAWS. The only service they could provide back then was readers or tapes; that was it. So, I worked for a while until I got my own money. And then 10 years later, after 30, I took the LSAT and got accepted to Drake Law School.

Keninger: What kind of work were you doing?

McGee: I was working at American Republic Insurance. I did policy Administration.

Keninger: Okay.

McGee: That was back when we had those MagCard II machines.

Keninger: Yes.

McGee: And, life has really been something. I can tell you I had complications. I'm sure, complications that some of these people didn't have. But they had complications I didn't have.

I remember Kenneth Jernigan was the first guy who could convince me not to be afraid of hot things. I was...even though I did well in Home Ec. at the Braille School, and even though I'd been cooking at home, because my mother died and somebody had to do the cooking. I was still afraid of fire. I didn't want anything to do with fire. And, I found out that Kenneth Jernigan didn't care whether he rolled up a piece of newspaper and lit it with a cigarette lighter and held it up in the fire place, you know, to air the flue out here in the Rec. Room; he was doing that. And, he taught me to do that with sleep shades on, and he taught me to use a barbecue grill with sleep shades on, and things like that.

I think that's another thing that I really remember clearly, is that I was very much afraid of things like that until I met him, and he explained to me, if you are quick about it, you won't get burned. You can still feel what you're doing and you won't get burned. And, like an idiot, I didn't realize that you can feel the food on the thing with the spatula.

Keninger: Oh sure.

McGee: So, I guess meeting a husband, figuring out I'm not some kind of weird freak, and learning not to be afraid of fire, that's a start. We'll get into the educational stuff in the email.

Keninger: Okay. Well, we're about out of time here, but thanks, Mary. This is fascinating; just to hear people's stories. Everybody's got 'em.

McGee: Well, what about yours. Do I get to hear yours now?

Keninger: Well, you know, in time I will do mine, too.

McGee: Well, you were...I read something about you. You can shut...go off the record now.

Keninger: All right.

20:17

(End of Recording)

Jo Ann Slayton

6/28/2011